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ABSTRACT

Building on the finding that respondent belief in the efficacy of surveys is perhaps more important in determining feelings of burden than interview length, some possible approaches available to the Federal Evaluation Contractor (FEC) to reduce respondent burden are identified. These approaches aim to generate acceptance at the various levels after the typical national school evaluation has received its necessary Federal Government approval. Procedures may include: (1) informing the state agencies, through their Committee on Evaluation and Information Systems (CEIS), of the study's objectives, the fact that it has been approved by the relevant Federal agencies, and the kinds of data-collection activities that are planned; (2) offering to answer any questions CEIS may have and to send project members to CEIS meetings to brief their representatives on the study plans; (3) inviting, where it appears appropriate, the Education Department to participate with the FEC in the CEIS briefings; (4) asking CEIS to write an "approval letter" that can be sent to the sample school districts; and (5) following up, in most cases, the CEIS letter with direct telephone contacts, letters, and sometimes in-person visits to the districts involved. When feasible, compensation may be offered. (RL)

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Respondent Burden: Implications for Federal Evaluation Contractors*

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As I understand it, this session is supposed to use Joanne Frankel's paper on the measurement of respondent burden as a point of departure, and to discuss that paper and the general issue of respondent burden from the perspective of the evaluation contractor. One slight problem with that plan is that Joanne's session ended up being scheduled after this one, so some of you may not have any idea what is in her paper. I will try to summarize some of her key points, and then go on with the discussion from my own viewpoint.

Briefly, Joanne's study, conducted for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, involved interviews of two different lengths, administered to a national sample of householders, and dealing with questions about the respondents' homes or apartments, how much rent they paid, how much they paid for utilities, etc. At the conclusion of each interview, the respondent was asked how burdensome he or she found it. Individuals who refused to participate in the interview were briefly queried about their reasons.

The first finding of this study was that the disclosed length of the interview (25 minutes or 75 minutes) did not affect whether individuals were willing to participate in the interview. Furthermore, length had no effect on the percentage of questions answered, or on any other such behavioral measure. However, respondents who had the long interview did report more often that the interview was uninteresting, unimportant, or difficult. Also, fewer respondents receiving the long interview said that they would be willing to allow the interviewer to return next year. Finally, a general belief on the respondents' part in the importance and efficacy of surveys was an important determiner of the respondents' feeling of burden.

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My first reaction to Joanne's paper is that it is valuable in pointing out that length of interview may not play quite the role we think it does in determining the respondents' feelings about their participation. However it is hard to know how much we can generalize from her findings. Would they apply to written questionnaires as well as to interviews? Would they apply to school children as well as to adults? How does interview or questionnaire length relate to the quality of the data received? All of these questions remain to be answered. Clearly some more research along these lines is highly desirable.

It is also important to note (and Joanne indicates this in her paper) that the Federal Government defines burden in terms of required response time rather than in terms of the respondents "feelings" of burden. Therefore, other considerations aside, Federal approval of data-collection plans, as in national evaluation studies, is often conditional on the response time being held to a minimum. There are several methods for reducing response time. One of the most important is to define the study goals and research issues precisely, so that essential data elements for the study can be distinguished from those which would merely be "nice to know." Eliminating "nice to know" items can sometimes go a long ways in pairing down questionnaire length. Clinical trials and field tests can also be helpful in identifying items that fail to yield usable data. In addition, the field tests can be used to compare the response times for different item formats and sequences. Sometimes simply asking a question in a different way can greatly reduce respondent burden.

My emphasis on response time is not meant to detract from the importance of the respondents' feelings about their participation in a survey. Clearly these feelings need to be given considerable weight in any data collection plans. Assuming that Joanne's findings do have some generalizability, one of the most interesting findings to me is that respondent belief in the efficacy of surveys was perhaps even more important in determining feelings of burden than interview length. Positive opinions about surveys in general are not going to be shaped quickly or easily, though Joanne's paper suggests some possible approaches. What may be more directly influenced by the

evaluation contractor is the respondents' attitudes toward the study immediately at hand. In the case of a household survey, it is the intended respondents themselves who must be persuaded to participate. In the case of school studies, however (and this is what SDC has been most heavily involved in), you have to try to build up enthusiasm, or at the very least passive acceptance, at several different levels, even after the study has received all necessary approval from the Federal Government. First of all, state agencies, through their Committee on Evaluation and Information Systems (CEIS), have begun playing an increasingly active role in reviewing data-collection plans. Their support of such plans, even where not legally required, is often essential if any cooperation is to be obtained from the school districts. Then, of course, approval must be obtained from the distract and school administrations before any data collection can occur in the classrooms. Finally, the students and/or their parents, depending on the students' ages, must approve. The students may not always be given a formal choice, but if they are antagonistic, data quality will obviously suffer.

The relevance of all this to Joanne Frankel's paper, and to the topic of this session, is that, at each level where approval and cooperation are required, a serious and well-planned effort on the part of the evaluation contractor is essential to persuade the individual or agency that the study is important, and that the particular questionnaire or test is vital to the study's success. In a typical national evaluation we would first write to the appropriate CEIS representatives, informing them of the study's objectives, the fact that it has been approved by the relevant Federal agencies, and the kinds of data-collection activities that are planned. We offer to answer any questions CEIS may have, and we may send project members to CEIS meetings to brief their representatives on the study plans. Where it appears appropriate we ask the Education Department to participate with us in these briefings.

Assuming that we are successful in these initial interactions with CEIS, we would normally ask CEIS to write a letter that can be sent to the sample school districts, saying that SDC is conducting a national study, that CEIS

has reviewed the study plan, and that in CEIS' view it is an appropriate study for the districts to participate in. This type of support can be crucial in getting local cooperation, but even so we find it essential in most cases to follow up the state letter with direct telephone contacts, SDC letters, and sometimes in-person visits to the districts involved.

At each of these steps--the state agencies, the districts, the schools, and finally the individual school staff members and students--we attempt to communicate something about the study's goals, general approach, and importance, that will be meaningful, and we hope persuasive. Of course, what is meaningful and persuasive for a state administrator, and what is persuasive for a teacher or student, may be quite different things. Regardless of the level of individual we are dealing with, however, we have found that concrete arguments and examples are a lot more effective than abstract claims about how "important this study will be for future educational policy." It is sometimes useful, for instance, to give several specific examples of policy questions we are trying to answer, and of how the types of data we plan to collect will help to answer those questions.

Another effective approach, when it is feasible, is to offer some form of compensation to the individuals whose cooperation we are trying to obtain. One such form of compensation, of course, is monetary payment. We have successfully used small cash stipends to pay student participants. We have also paid school staff members for any time they may spend beyond normal work hours in administering tests or filling out information forms for the study. On occasion we have reimbursed a school or district for some share of a clerk's time, so that that clerk could assist in abstracting certain school records. Our own informal observations indicate that such financial reimbursement, even if it does not amount to much on a per-hour basis, can be helpful in obtaining cooperation.

But there is another kind of reimbursement that can be even more effective under some conditions, and that is in the form of information given back to the participant. For example, we can sometimes offer state agencies statistical summaries of data collected within their individual states.

Similarly, we may be able to provide data summaries aggregated at the district level and/or school levels, for administrators at those levels. An example of this, but at the postsecondary level, is a study I am directing of the Special Services for Disadvantaged Students Program, under a contract from the Education Department. Here we asked project staff members in 58 colleges and universities to fill out and send to SDC a fairly detailed record every time one or more students received some special program service, such as counseling or tutoring. These staff members were probably not particularly interested in our use for the data, which was to analyze them in relation to outcome data so as to learn what service patterns were having the greatest impact on students. But what did interest the staff was that we were able to provide any project with information summaries showing how many students received each type of service in a given period of time, how many sessions of each service were involved, how many and what kinds of staff members were providing the services, and how many hours of each service were given, in total and on a per-student basis. This information cost our study relatively little to provide, because it was based on the same data we were planning to analyze anyway. Its importance to the projects was two-fold. First, it provided part of the information they needed for their own summary reports to their parent Federal agency in Washington. And second, each project could compare its own service distributions with the average figures for the SSDS Program nationally, This was the first opportunity some projects had had to see how they stacked up with other projects in the kinds and amounts of services they were providing to participating students.

There are many other possible techniques for getting participation and cooperation from education agencies and individual respondents. One, for example, is to use local data collectors who may already have considerable familiarity with, and acceptance by, the school system. Sometimes it is helpful to have letters of backing from some high-ranking education official at the state or Federal level; at other times such a letter may be counterproductive.

But whatever kinds of persuasion the evaluation contractor may use, and despite the research findings reported by Joanne Frankel, minimizing respondent burden is always of crucial concern, if only because of the Federal government's policy in this regard. It has already become increasingly difficult to get data-collection plans approved by OMB and other review agencies, as anyone conducting evaluations for the Federal government is well aware.

What of the future? I may be wrong, but it seems to me a safe prediction that obstacles to data collection, at least that sponsored by the Federal government, will increase at an even faster rate over the next few years. The basic reason for this lies in the changing relationship already apparent between the Federal government and state and local governments. The new administration is acting rapidly to remove Federal control over social program areas, as is evident in its plan to consolidate most Federally funded education programs into non-targeted block grants. It does not take a genius to anticipate that the states and local agencies will soon be in a strong position to limit external evaluations and to set their own terms and conditions for any collection of data within their jurisdictions. While in practice this has always been true to a certain extent, the Federal government has exercised some leverage through their control of Federal funds to the states and local agencies. If those controls are eliminated or greatly weakened, as appears likely, the leverage will also largely disappear.

What does all this mean for evaluation contractors? First, it means that we will have to watch closely for any indications of the extent to which state agencies are likely to pick up some of the burden of accountability--and thus of evaluation studies--previously assumed by the Federal government. As Federal restrictions are lifted, will the states adopt a laisse faire attitude about the local agencies' expenditures of funds, or will the states themselves introduce more regulations and demand more accountability for programs over which they have responsibility? The answer to this question will clearly have a large influence on the near-term future of evaluation contractors, and indeed, on the future of evaluation research in general.

Second, the present and future shift in governmental power means that evaluators will have to devote even more attention than they have in the past to their relationships with the state and local agencies. We will have to convince these agencies that the study being planned will be directly beneficial to them, not just to Congress or to some Federal agency. For many evaluators this will be a new and uncomfortable role--having to sell ourselves at the local level--but we had better learn it quickly. On the positive side, I believe that learning this new role can be a valuable experience even aside from the political expediences created by the recent change in administration. Having the Federal government behind us to help get the cooperation of school districts has perhaps made us lazy about formulating study goals clearly and in a form that state and local agencies can relate to their own needs. More than that, it has probably made us lazy about attempting to understand the needs ourselves. If we survive this learning experience, I believe we will be better evaluators, and the field of evaluation methodology will itself be improved, regardless of future trends in the pendulum of centralized versus decentralized government.